

Changing Our Nature: Ethical Naturalism, Objectivity, and History

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Abstract

This paper argues that Aristotelian ethical naturalism can combine two commitments that are often held to be incompatible: (a) a commitment to a strong form of ethical objectivity and (b) a thoroughgoing historicism about ethical value. The notions of *species* and *life-form* invoked by ethical naturalism do not, I argue, rely upon an ahistorical picture of human nature. I develop this idea by building upon Philippa Foot's defence of ethical naturalism in *Natural Goodness*. I go on to argue that linguistic changes in the ways we articulate the conditions of human flourishing can be understood, in some cases, as transforming those very conditions.

1. The Problem

Does morality require an ahistorical core? The assumption that it does, found in defenders and critics of moral objectivity alike, can be expressed in the following form: *if objective moral grounds exist, they must be (traceable back to grounds that are) historically inalterable*.¹ According to this assumption, the postulation of grounds that objectively constrain ethical judgement and practice is, *ipso facto*, the postulation of grounds that transcend historical flux. Reformulated as an equally familiar contrapositive: *if some putative moral grounds are discovered to be historically alterable, they must not be objective*. Call the thought expressed in both forms the *immutability thesis*, since it holds that objective moral grounds, whether or not they exist, would have to be immutable.

The idea is ancient. Consider an example from Sophocles' *Antigone*. Having buried her brother not once, but twice, in violation of royal decree, Antigone is brought before the court to face Creon's judgment. Freely admitting her deed, Antigone describes the laws that bind her as eternal and divine:

¹ In all further formulations I omit the parenthetical addition, though it is assumed throughout. It is meant to foreground that the grounds in question are those one might call 'ultimate', 'foundational', or 'regress-stopping'.

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I did not believe
your proclamation had such power to enable
one who will someday die to override
God's ordinances, unwritten and secure.
They are not of today and yesterday;
They live forever; none knows when first they were.
(Sophocles, 2013, lines 450–9)

Though Antigone's words express a religious ethos particular to her time and place, they also express a conviction that has endured for millennia in both religious and secular guises: there is a deep relationship between the authority of ethical demands and their being rooted in something unchanging.

Antigone's conviction recurs in various guises in the history of moral philosophy. Perhaps its most explicit celebrations come from the early modern rationalists, who held that the ground of morality was the unchanging 'order' or 'reason' of the universe. In his *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Ralph Cudworth states the immutability thesis plainly: 'if there be anything at all good or evil, just or unjust, there must of necessity be something naturally and immutably good and just' (1996, p. 16). Samuel Clarke copied the lines from *Antigone* quoted above into the margins of his *Discourse Concerning the Unalterable Obligations of Natural Religion*, where he compares the immutability of fundamental moral laws to the principles that govern mathematics, geometry, and mechanical physics (1728, p. 215). Yet the assumption is not restricted to such theological worldviews. Kant, we shall see, maintains the immutability thesis when he relocates ethical grounds from the fabric of the cosmos to the structure of pure practical reason. Nor is it restricted to moral objectivity's defenders. For the assumption is that, *whether or not objective moral grounds exist*, the very idea of such grounds involves their immutability. Thus, an image of objective values constrained by the immutability thesis can serve as a handy target for sceptics of values untouched by history.²

This paper asks whether Aristotelian ethical naturalism can break free of the immutability thesis. Ethical naturalists like Philippa Foot (2001), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), and Michael Thompson (2004, 2008) hold that ethical judgments are grounded in the *human life-form*. This is an updated version of the ancient view that

² Mackie, for instance, cites Clarke's eternal 'Relations of Things' as exemplifying his target when he attacks objective values (1977, p. 40). See also Williams (1985, p. 153) and Foucault (1984, p. 78).

morality is grounded in human nature, in what creatures like us need to survive, flourish, and be actualized (Aristotle, 2009, *EN* I.7 1097b22–1098a19). Does this require an ahistorical picture of human nature? Many have thought so.³ This has fuelled suspicions that ethical naturalism cannot succeed, for it ignores the historical dynamism of our species. A passage from Bernard Williams – though it predates the defences of ethical naturalism just cited – exemplifies the suspicion:

[W]e only have to compare Aristotle's catalogue of the virtues with any that might be produced now to see how pictures of an appropriate human life may differ in spirit and in the actions and institutions they call for. We also have the idea that there are many and various forms of human excellence which will not all fit together into one harmonious whole, so any determinate ethical outlook is going to represent some kind of specialization in human possibilities. That idea is deeply entrenched in any naturalistic or, again, historical conception of human nature – that is, in any adequate conception of it – and I find it hard to believe that it will be overcome by an objective inquiry, or that human beings could turn out to have a much more determinate nature than is suggested by what we already know, one that timelessly demanded a life of a particular kind.

The project of giving to ethical life an objective and determinate grounding in considerations about human nature is not, in my view, very likely to succeed. (1985, p. 153)

Williams' conviction that a 'historical conception of human nature' can underwrite an attack on ethical naturalism raises the question of this paper. For not only does this forceful passage illustrate a version of the immutability thesis in its contrapositive form (with its tacit premise, 'If human nature is historically alterable, it cannot provide objective moral grounds'), but it poses precisely the challenge I wish to take up here. Might we not, *contra* Williams, pursue a picture of morals as objectively grounded in considerations about

³ Whyman writes that Foot holds 'a notion of the human good as something univocal, and ultimately unchanging – something that every human being, who has ever existed, is subject to in ethical reflection in exactly the same way' (2018, p. 167). Both Hacker-Wright's Kantian approach (2009a and 2009b) and Frey's Thomist approach (2018) urge that ethical naturalism requires an 'invariant core' (Hacker-Wright 2009a, p. 416). Haase argues naturalists should hold that virtues like justice are invariant features of 'practically self-conscious life' (2018, p. 124).

human flourishing while remaining conceptually innocent of any assumptions about the ‘timelessness’ of its demands?⁴

Having raised the problem in this section, our next task shall be to sketch a Kantian argument for the immutability thesis (Section 2), which will allow us to see how a historicized variation of ethical naturalism evades its assumptions (Section 3). Although I build upon ideas in Foot and others, my thesis is not the exegetical claim that Foot or her defenders hold the historicized view of ethical objectivity defended here. Rather, my claim is that the core thesis of ethical naturalism, namely, that all ethical judgment is life-form dependent, is conceptually independent of the immutability thesis. Life-forms can change while grounding objective evaluative thought. After offering an initial argument for this claim, I consider objections from ethical naturalists who defend the idea of an ‘invariant core’ of human nature (Section 4). I then turn to the role of linguistic and conceptual change in contributing to the historical development of our life-form (Sections 5 and 6). Building upon ideas in Charles Taylor (1985, 2016), I argue that human beings’ efforts to express their life-form in concepts and words can contribute to its historical development. A key distinction here is one Taylor draws between *descriptions*, which leave their objects unchanged, and *articulations*, which help constitute the objects they bring to light. I argue that our collective efforts to conceptualize and express in language the conditions of human flourishing are often better understood as articulations. The result is an ethical naturalism that maintains a historical conception of human nature without sacrificing ethical objectivity.

2. A Kantian Argument for the Immutability Thesis

A powerful argument for the immutability thesis can be derived from Kant. For Kant, the ‘objectivity’ of a practical principle is defined by its ‘holding for the will of every rational being’ (2015, Ak. 5:19). If a moral requirement binds me *rationally*, then it binds an aspect of me that I share with every rational being. Though the details of how I am

⁴ This has precedent in MacIntyre (2007) and deeper still in Hegel (2018) and Marx (1988), who have been interpreted as ‘historicized ethical naturalists’ (Wood, 1990, pp. 33–5). More recently, see Whyman (2018), Müller (2020), and Lawrence (2020). See also McDowell (1996, Lecture IV; and 1998), who defends a Hegelian naturalism of ‘second nature’.

to act will invariably be constrained by contingent features of my situation, the underlying principle determining my will is 'objective' in the sense that any rational being in relevantly similar circumstances would be similarly bound. Additionally, any rational being examining the circumstances I am in should ideally come to the same conclusion about what I ought to do. So, although rational beings find themselves in different situations across history and location, the universal scope of moral requirements presupposes a rational principle all those historically and locally situated beings share. The immutability thesis follows insofar as the class containing 'every rational being' extends not only across all of space, such that rational aliens would be bound by the same fundamental moral law as human beings,⁵ but also across all of time. At any point in history, whenever we find beings who qualify as rational, we should discover the same moral principle operating through their wills.

To be sure, Kant held that the exact nature of our specific moral duties requires historical contextualization. For example, the case of the shopkeeper in the *Groundwork* (Ak. 4:397) who acts wrongly in overcharging inexperienced customers assumes a society with specific economic practices involving money and markets. Similarly, the 'Casuistical Questions' in the *Metaphysics of Morals* are not the dilemmas of an abstract rational being but of humans in historically concrete contexts: whether it is permissible to receive a smallpox vaccination (Ak. 6:424), whether excessive intake of food and drink is permissible at a banquet (Ak. 6:428), whether a military leader is permitted to commit suicide if captured to avoid betraying his country (Ak. 6:423). Kant's defenders are increasingly in agreement that Kant never intended his abstract formulae of the categorical imperative to provide, by themselves, a logically deducible register of concrete moral duties (see, especially, Wood, 1999). The latter, Kant emphasizes, require anthropological and historical inputs (2012, Ak. 4:388; 2017, Ak. 6:411–2; cf. Wood, 1999, chap. 4). Thus, in determining our specific moral duties, Kant makes ample room for historicity.

Kant's commitment to the immutability thesis therefore consists in a more fundamental theoretical conviction: the supreme principle of morality (in contrast to specific duties to oneself and others outlined

⁵ Kant emphasizes that the categorical imperative 'does not restrict itself to human beings only, but applies to all finite beings having reason and will' (2012, Ak. 4:389). Thompson highlights Kant's views about aliens as a point of contrast with Aristotelian ethics (2004, pp. 60–1; 2008, pp. 7–8; and 2022).

in the Doctrine of Virtue) is beyond the possibility of historical transformation, because it reflects the inalterable structure of pure practical reason (2012, Ak. 4:389; 2015, Ak. 5:8). Allen Wood explains:

Kant holds that our *use* of reason develops through history but that reason itself is a single faculty with unchanging principles. History is not the emergence of *reason* out of tradition or revelation but the development *through reason* of the entire range of human capacities and dispositions. (1999, p. 230, italics in original)

We are therefore justified in speaking of an *ahistorical core* of Kant's ethics, one consistent with the notion that specific moral duties undergo historical change. Insofar as this ahistorical core refers to the ultimate ground of morality, Kant is committed to the immutability thesis.

The result is a compartmentalization of morality into a changing and an unchanging part (cf. Raz, 1994). This is reflected in Kant's systematic distinction between the 'empirical' and 'pure' parts of ethics (2012, Ak. 4:388). Yet we encounter this compartmentalization well beyond Kant, in any moral theory that defends a principle, practical recommendation, or procedure of deliberation intended to be intelligible independently of, and authoritative across, all historical contexts. This includes, at least, Kant's own inheritors, variations of contractualism, utilitarianism, and some versions of ethical naturalism.⁶ We can say that such views embrace *partial historicism*, since they hold that aspects of morality can shift while maintaining an invariant moral core. We may contrast this with *thorough historicism*, which rejects this compartmentalization.

3. Life-Form Dependence and Immutability

Let us ask, then, whether ethical naturalism is open to thorough historicism. Ethical naturalists argue that ethical judgment is grounded in the human *life-form*, a concept that can be understood, roughly, as an ethically saturated counterpart to the biological concept, *species*. Their argument has two major steps. First, they identify a distinctive

⁶ For the first three sorts of view, see, respectively, Korsgaard (2009), Scanlon (1998), and Parfit (2011). For ethical naturalists who embrace immutability, see note 3. For further examples, see Moody-Adams' platonic defence of the unchangeability of fundamental moral concepts (2004, p. 268) and Richardson's claim that, although morality changes at its periphery, it retains an 'invariant core' (2018, p. 21).

kind of form-relative judgment aimed at living creatures. These judgments assess a creature, not by the judge's merely subjective ends and preferences ('*x* is strong enough to pull a plough', '*x* is cute', '*x* is good to eat'), but in relation to life-activities and vital characteristics that exemplify members of its kind. Whether a pair of wings is strong enough depends upon whether they belong to a *hummingbird* or an *albatross*. Whether this plant's root system is absorbing enough moisture depends upon whether it is an *oak* or a *cactus*. What qualifies as good eyesight is one thing in an *owl* and another in an *octopus*. In short, features that are healthy, typical, or life-promoting in one species can be unhealthy, depriving, or lethal in another. Ethical naturalists urge that evaluations of the latter sort ('These wings are well developed', 'These roots are healthy', 'This creature's eyes function well') form a distinctive class characterized by their 'life-form relativity' (Foot, 2001, p. 27; Thompson, 2004, pp. 60–2; 2008, p. 81). Such judgments are grounded, not in the judge's subjective attitudes, but in the creature's *life-form*, the purposive unity of behaviours, life-cycles, and vital characteristics that members of a species need to survive and flourish. In making such judgments, one ascribes values to nature without their being grounded in one's merely subjective attitudes, thus aspiring to objectivity.

The second step is to argue that, insofar as ethical judgment is concerned with the question of how to live well, and insofar as human ethical life is no less natural than plant or animal life, ethical assessments of human action share the same logical structure of life-form dependence (Foot, 2001, p. 27; Thompson, 2004, p. 60). So, for example, evaluating the wrongness of some action-type involves an appreciation that certain conditions are important for our creature-specific flourishing in the way that deep roots are important for an oak, combined with an assessment of the action-type as denying, destroying, or distorting those conditions. If one of the harms of child abuse is that it destroys bonds of trust that need to be developed in early childhood for a life to go well, then its wrongness consists, at least, in its depriving a member of our life-form of an essential condition of flourishing – roughly as damaging the root system of an oak would do for it.

Both steps are controversial.⁷ For present purposes, however, the crucial point is that nothing in the structure of life-form dependence

⁷ The literature is vast, but representative objections include that ethical naturalism ignores our reflexive capacity to step back from the authority of our life-form (Korsgaard, 2011); indulges an indefensible foundationalism by grounding ethical demands in our 'first nature' (McDowell, 1998,

requires the reifying supposition that owls, oaks, and octopuses – or, indeed, humans – have unalterable natures. On the contrary, because the relevant evaluative judgments refer only to features that characterize a life-form at the moment of assessment, they are compatible with the life-form's undergoing historical change both before and after that moment. Foot says this explicitly, urging that her view sits comfortably with evolutionary theories of species-development: 'species themselves are subject to change' and so the truth of a system of natural historical judgments is the 'truth about a species at a given historical time, and it is only the relative stability of at least the most general features of the different species of living things that makes these propositions possible at all' (2001, p. 29). Hursthouse (1999) writes that, while such judgments are grounded in a species' characteristic ways of going on', it is always possible for species members to develop 'a new characteristic way of going on' (p. 203) and thus to have 'changed their nature' (p. 220n2). Thompson likewise emphasizes that 'we are able to describe changes in the characteristics natural-historically attributable to particular kinds of living things, and so to supply a Darwinian account of these changes' (2008, p. 66). Thus, ascribing a characteristic to a creature's life-form presupposes neither the immutability of that characteristic nor of that life-form in general. If the life-form can change while continuing to orient evaluative thought about its members, we have a model for a thoroughly historicized objective value, in this case, values that arise immanently from living, evolving nature.

To begin to see how this works in an ethical case, consider one of Foot's examples, namely, that we are creatures who engage in practices of promising. Following Anscombe (1981b), Foot contends that to break a promise, in the absence of special circumstances, is to act badly, where this evaluation is rooted in 'quite general facts about human beings' (2001, p. 45). These facts include the importance of exchange, trustworthiness, and securing our futures by

Essay 9); is 'conservative' in its restriction of the potential forms of human flourishing (Whyman, 2017, p. 1224; cf. Hursthouse, 1999, p. 211); is 'speciesist' given the special role it grants to the *human* in ethics (Richardson, 2018, p. 82; for defences, see Crary, 2021 and Ng, 2021); and runs afoul of contemporary biology (for discussion and defence, see Hacker-Wright, 2009b and Moosavi, 2019). Though I touch on some of these issues below, my focus is the assumption that this picture loses its claim to objectivity unless it presupposes an ahistorical core.

relying on others. They also include features indexed to social roles, for example, 'what it means for parents to be able to rely on a promise securing the future of their children in case of their death' (p. 45). As Foot develops the point, the wrongness of an instance of promise-breaking is grounded, not in an immutable principle, but a life-form that has developed over time to include such features as these. She writes,

It would be different if human beings were different, and could bind the wills of others through some kind of future-related mind-control device. But we have not got such powers, any more than animals who depend on cooperative hunting have the power of catching their prey as tigers do, by solitary stalk and pounce. (2001, p. 45)

The moral importance of promising is no less a matter of our natural history than the importance of cooperative hunting is for a wolf, who cannot suddenly gain the powers of a tiger. When we inquire into the wrongness of false and broken promises, what we have to appeal to are facts about human beings such as the importance of exchange, trustworthiness, and securing our futures, along with our inability to secure them through alternatives like the 'mind-control' powers Foot imagines here. These facts appear quite stable, and so can provide a normative horizon against which moral judgments about promising are intelligible and authoritative. They can do so even if they bear no logical or transcendental necessity, in a sense that would entail their immutability as opposed to relative stability. The picture is that of a species that has developed over long historical periods to live socially in certain ways, with historically evolved needs, dependencies, and shared concerns. The wrongness of promise-breaking, when it is wrong, emerges from this simultaneously natural and cultural historical development.

It remains, moreover, emphatically objective. An objective moral ground must impose some form of unchosen constraint upon our subjectivity, such that what is morally important transcends personal whim and social convention. Recall Foot's distinction between two sorts of evaluative judgments concerning living creatures: those relative to the judge's desires, interests, and projects ('*x* is good for eating', '*x* is good for pulling a plough') and those relative to a creature's life-form ('*x*'s root system is healthy', '*x*'s eyesight is functioning properly'). Foot calls these judgments of *secondary goodness* and *natural goodness*, respectively (pp. 26–7). Ethical judgments concerning human practices like promising are judgments of natural goodness. Such judgments *depend upon* human beings, for they depend

upon general facts about our life-form. In Foot's example, such facts include the importance of trust, exchange, and securing our futures. Yet this sort of dependence does not entail the anti-objectivist thesis that the judgments they support are ultimately expressions of the judge's subjective attitudes. Though *dependent upon us*, ethical grounds are not *up to us*, and so the imperatives those grounds underwrite remain categorical, rather than hypothetical.⁸ Roughly, then, this view aspires to meet an important desideratum of ethical objectivity, namely, providing unchosen constraints upon our subjectivity, while remaining open to the idea that what constrains us is deeply historical.

It can seem this asks us to sacrifice too much. Part of the attraction of Kant's definition of ethical objectivity is its capturing an intuition worth defending, namely, that moral requirements are universal in scope and binding with 'necessity' (2012, Ak. 4:389). Thoroughly historicized ethical naturalism appears forced to defend a bland picture of moral requirements as – because neither universal nor necessary – merely parochial and contingent. Yet we can do justice to the notions of universality and necessity without adopting Kant's definition. Universality is at stake when agents express moral claims, neither simply to themselves nor to a closed audience of like-minded others, but to a public, open-ended audience. They seek to express such claims in ways that any fellow reflective participant in shared ethical life can, in principle, grasp. The key here is that there is no obstacle to our saying that the hoped-for universality in such cases is defined by a historically developed class of *fellow life-form bearers* as opposed to an ahistorically defined class of *rational beings*. To say that some moral claim has 'universal' authority is, by itself, incomplete. For we cannot comprehend the relevant notion of 'universality' until we specify the set over which the claim purportedly has force. So, with the shift from *rational being* to *fellow life-form bearer*, it is not the idea of universality that has been abandoned, but a particular picture of what provides the appropriate set. The universal scope of moral significance remains, albeit in a historically sensitive, life-form-relative guise.

Something similar goes for *necessity*. Urging that ethical requirements are grounded in a historically concrete life-form is not to trade the necessity of ethical demands for their mere contingency. Rather, ethical naturalism provides a framework within which we

⁸ Cf. Foot's self-critique (2001, pp. 60–3) of her earlier view (Foot, 1972) and McDowell (1998, Essay 4).

may identify certain acts, practices, and conditions as, in Foot's phrase, 'Aristotelian necessities', which she glosses as 'that which is necessary because and in so far as good hangs on it' (p. 15).⁹ For Foot, practices like promising, as well as virtues like justice and courage, are Aristotelian necessities, for they both enable and help constitute certain human goods. Historicized ethical naturalism embraces this while pointing out that nothing about the modality of 'Aristotelian necessity' hinges upon the immutability of the goods in question. The goods, along with the virtues and practices that actualize them, may owe their existence to a history of development. Though words like 'justice' and 'courage' may recur across historical epochs, and may continually give expression to genuine Aristotelian necessities, the values, needs, and possibilities for flourishing those words express can retain a historically dynamic character.

We can now see that the Kantian argument (Section 2) relies upon a premise that an ethical naturalist is free to reject. For it requires that we define the 'objectivity' of a moral ground in terms of its holding for all rational beings. Any ethical naturalist, historicized or not, can deny this, since the widest possible class of beings for whom moral requirements are shared is defined not by the class of *rational beings* but by the class of *fellow life-form bearers*. If this is true, and if life-forms change (as Foot, Thompson, and Hursthouse all acknowledge), the Kantian argument never gets going on the naturalist's picture.

4. Three Objections from a Partially Historicized Ethical Naturalist

It can look as though this view ignores features of ethical naturalism that, despite the considerations just raised, speak in favour of an unchanging ethical core. I shall now consider three objections from an ethical naturalist who defends partial over thorough historicism. To anticipate, the objections are that (i) the thesis of life-form dependence constitutes ethical naturalism's ahistorical core; (ii) we have non-observational access to unchanging features of our life-form; and (iii) unchanging ethical constraints follow from our capacity for self-conscious agency.

⁹ Though the phrase is Foot's, she attributes the idea to Anscombe (1981a). Cf. Vogler (2020).

(i) *The Immutability of Life-Form Dependence*

The first objection is that ethical naturalism leaves in place its own ahistorical core, namely, the thesis of life-form dependence itself. Whatever else might change within a life-form, there can be no changing the fundamental condition of having to make ethical judgments against the background of a value-laden picture of the kinds of creatures we are. This leads to a dilemma: either relinquish our thorough historicism by admitting that life-form dependence is immutable or relinquish our naturalism by denying that life-form dependence pervades all objective ethical thought. Either way, thoroughly historicized ethical naturalism undermines itself.

It is true that life-form dependence is not subject to change on my view. However, the objection rests upon a conflation of two kinds of claim: what we might call, following a suggestion from Foot, *grammatical claims*, which make explicit the logical connections between a certain class of concepts and judgments, and *substantive ethical principles*, which make explicit imperatives, rules, procedures, and practical recommendations meant to have normative authority for moral agents.¹⁰ Thoroughly historicized ethical naturalism denies that there are timeless truths of the latter sort, not the former. If the thesis of life-form dependence were a substantive ethical principle, it would have to be reformulated in explicitly action-guiding terms. Perhaps: *I ought never to proceed except in such a way that my action actualizes the life-form I bear*; or, more succinctly: *be the sort of creature you are!* Yet such reformulations turn out to be empty. There may be instances in which the imperative ‘*Be human!*’ has ethical content, being uttered with the intention of ruling out certain forms of behaviour and promoting others. Yet when such an utterance has ethical content, it is only thanks to some antecedent substantive conception of the life-form in question, and such a substantive conception is not built into the thesis of life-form dependence as such. This should lead us to reject the assumption upon which the objection rests, namely, that the thesis of life-form dependence is a substantive ethical principle akin to Kant’s categorical imperative or the principle of utility, viewing it instead as a grammatical claim about a certain stretch of evaluative judgment.

¹⁰ Foot credits her notion of grammar to Wittgenstein (2001, p. 91). On Foot’s method as grammatical investigation, see Hursthouse (2018) and Lott (2018). Cf. Thompson’s (2003) distinction between ‘logical’ and ‘substantive Footianism’.

(ii) *Non-Observational Knowledge of Human Form*

The second objection starts from the claim, defended by Thompson (2004), that at least some substantive knowledge of our life-form is not founded upon empirical observation.¹¹ If knowledge of our life-form were pervasively empirical, this objector points out, it would be knowledge of the ‘merely contingent’. Yet if non-observational knowledge of our life-form is possible, we may apprehend features that, because they are available *a priori*, are unchanging.¹²

Yet this is too quick. To see why, recall Thompson’s argument.¹³ He starts from the claim that an awareness of one’s own psychological states is typically not founded upon empirical observation. That I am *in pain*, *hungry*, or *thinking* are phenomena about which I am typically non-observationally aware (2004, p. 70). Intentional action has this character, too, Thompson notes, referencing Anscombe’s (2000) idea of a kind of practical knowledge agents have of their own intentional doings. One can, Thompson continues, reflect upon such experiences in ways that lead to *general* knowledge about one’s life-form. For I may come to view these facts – that I suffer pain, feel hunger, think, and intentionally act – not as private idiosyncrasies, but as vital phenomena typifying the life-form I bear. Through this non-observational route, I apprehend pain, hunger, thought, and intentional action as potentially attributable to all fellow life-form bearers, thus arriving at substantive non-observational knowledge of my life-form in general.

This only constitutes an objection, however, if we assume that the non-observational knowledge in question is *a priori* knowledge in a traditional sense of being knowledge of the unchanging (cf. Kant 2003, Introduction, §II). But the non-observational knowledge Anscombe examines in *Intention*, along with first-personal

¹¹ Cf. Thompson (2022), Frey (2018, pp. 78–81), Hacker-Wright (2009a, pp. 418–9), and Haase (2018, pp. 130–5).

¹² To be clear, I am not attributing this objection to Thompson, but imagining a critic who draws upon Thompson to develop it.

¹³ Thompson’s critique of ‘exaggerated empiricism’ about human form (2004, p. 47) is multifaceted, and we should carefully distinguish the aspect relevant here. It is enough to note three levels, though Thompson subdivides his anti-empiricism further. He defends (i) the *a priori* character of the pure concept, *life-form* (pp. 63–6); (ii) the *a priori* character of the self-ascribed concept, *the life-form I bear* (pp. 66–70); and (iii) the *non-observational* character of at least some substantive knowledge of the human life-form (pp. 70–2). Here I focus on the third level, at which substantive moral knowledge enters.

knowledge of psychological states, is not the same as Cartesian or Kantian *a priori* knowledge. As Thompson emphasizes, the same historically mutable fact (for example, that *I am making tea*) can be known non-observationally from a first-person perspective and observationally from a third-person perspective (Thompson, 2004, p. 71; cf. Anscombe, 2000, §32). This is a basic point about Anscombean non-observational knowledge: it encompasses knowledge of the mutable. Yet this applies equally to the general knowledge of our life-form just considered. I may reach the conclusion that pain or intentional action is a feature, not of the idiosyncratic individual I am, but of my life-form, and I may reach it through non-observational reflection. Yet nothing immutable follows from my having reached such knowledge non-observationally.¹⁴ Thompson makes this explicit: ‘The concept *human* as our naturalist employs it is a concept that attaches to a definite product of nature, one which has arisen on this planet, quite contingently, in the course of evolutionary history’ (2004, p. 59). Thus, the idea of non-observational knowledge sits comfortably with thoroughly historicized ethical naturalism.

(iii) *The Necessities of Self-Conscious Agency*

Even if an ahistorical core does not directly follow from non-observationalism, perhaps it can be demonstrated through a supplementary argument that reveals certain features of our life-form as inalterable. John Hacker-Wright pursues an argument along these lines, one that attempts to deduce from basic premises about our species’ capacity for self-conscious agency an ‘invariant core’ of our life-form (2009a, p. 416).

Hacker-Wright starts from the premise that we cannot avoid thinking of ourselves as self-conscious agents capable of acting on reasons.¹⁵ This introduces requirements concerning the qualities a human must develop to achieve this status. Minimally, we need *prudence* (a capacity to identify efficient means to one’s ends), a *sense of competence* (a sense that one *can* realize one’s ends), and *self-worth* (a sense that one’s ends are worthwhile). This, in turn, imposes

¹⁴ At most, what is apprehended as immutable is that such knowledge is mediated by the concepts *life-form* and *the life-form I bear*. This returns us to objection (i) and my response. See note 13 for the importance of distinguishing the levels of Thompson’s anti-empiricism.

¹⁵ For the argument reconstructed in this paragraph, see Hacker-Wright (2009a, pp. 421–7).

constraints on what humans must be like to provide a ‘minimally decent upbringing’ that nurtures these qualities in children. Teaching prudence requires a capacity to discern a child’s interests, imaginatively occupy their perspective, and invest great effort in ways that may not serve one’s egoistic desires. Cultivating senses of competence and self-worth in a child requires patience, care, and loving encouragement. None of this, Hacker-Wright urges, is possible without virtues like courage and temperance since caretakers must be prepared to take risks for their charges and refrain from acting upon desires that conflict with their caretaking responsibilities. Thus, from a minimal conception of ourselves as self-conscious agents, coupled with reflections upon the minimally decent upbringing that cultivates such agency, Hacker-Wright concludes that humans need certain virtues.

Let me respond with three points. First, any argument along these lines is *supplementary* to the grammatical investigation that supports the thesis of life-form dependence. It remains that nothing about life-form dependence entails an invariant moral core. The motivations for such an argument must, therefore, have an independent source. In Hacker-Wright’s case, it is the worry that our life-form is unable to provide objective constraints in the absence of an identifiable invariant core (2009a, p. 416). Arguments of this form thus cannot demonstrate that ethical naturalism is internally constrained by the immutability thesis. Rather, they presuppose it.

Second – supposing one pursues such an argument anyway – its premises and conclusion are more thoroughly historical than the phrase, ‘invariant core’, suggests. Consider the premise that we cannot help but interpret ourselves as self-conscious agents responsive to reasons. Perhaps immutable ethical requirements could be deduced if the premise concerned *self-conscious agency* or *reasons-responsiveness* as such. For then the argument would draw out normative conclusions implicit in these concepts in their purity, such that any rational being would be beholden to them. Yet this route is unavailable to an ethical naturalist, who must hold that the concepts of *self-consciousness agency* and *reasons-responsiveness* refer, not to species-transcendent capacities, but to their concretely human manifestations. Just as *sight* in an eagle is dramatically different from *sight* in an octopus, the capacities for self-conscious agency and reasons-responsiveness are species-specific on this picture. Thus, any argument purporting to derive ethical requirements from such features is, thereby, striving to articulate features of ‘a definite product of nature, one which has arisen on this planet, quite contingently, in the course of evolutionary history’ (Thompson, 2004, p. 59). Any

practical necessities such an argument uncovers will, therefore, rest upon a more fundamental historicity, and thus provide no grounds for postulating unchanging ethical truths *sub specie aeternitatis*.

If this is granted, then an argument like Hacker-Wright's cannot proceed via deduction from pure concepts but must draw upon what can be discerned about our life-form from the inside. Hacker-Wright is aware of this, and so his argument relies, not upon a formal derivation of transcendently necessary conditions for rationally self-conscious agency, but intuitions he trusts his reader will share concerning the cultivation of a child's self-conscious agency. The argument relies, moreover, upon his reader's intuitions about 'what we ordinarily understand as the virtues' (2009a, pp. 421–2). Here the argument seems particularly vulnerable to a historicist rejoinder, which brings me to my third point. Any capacity the reader might have to appreciate and share these intuitions will require the 'minimally decent upbringing' outlined as a necessity in Hacker-Wright's own argument. Yet it is hard to see how our dependence upon a minimally decent upbringing avoids bringing back in all the 'second natural' mediation that makes the intuitions supporting the argument look, once again, thoroughly historical.¹⁶ The burden then shifts to the partially historicized naturalist to explain how we can credit any such intuitions as tracking 'invariant' features of our life-form while remaining within the historically inculcated outlooks we owe to our upbringing. Doing so will face difficulties since we cannot take as given any substantive picture of 'what we ordinarily understand as the virtues' without occupying a value-laden perspective that has been taught, shared, and woven into our developed self-understandings. This means, as I shall now elaborate, that 'what we ordinarily understand' about ethical matters is invariably a result of *articulation*.

5. Articulating Our Nature

To get into this idea, we may borrow Charles Taylor's (1985, 2016) distinction between *descriptions*, which target objects like tables and planets, and *articulations*, which target features of ourselves such as our desires, emotions, and values. When I say that the table has four legs, or that Venus has a surface area of 177.7 million miles, I

¹⁶ Hacker-Wright frames his argument in opposition to McDowell's (1996) view that apprehension of ethical truth is thoroughly mediated by 'second nature'.

describe those objects, which remain unaltered by my conceptualizations of them. By contrast, when I find a fresh conceptualization for an inchoate sense of affection, I *articulate* it. Here the concepts and words I bring to my experience may alter its quality and significance. My affection may unfold in different directions depending upon whether I articulate it as, say, *passionate*, *lukewarm*, or *tinged with jealousy*. Articulations follow an *expressive logic*, according to which their objects become what they are, in significant part, through their conceptualization. Yet articulations remain, like descriptions, answerable to objective constraints. I can fail to understand that my affections are tinged with jealousy, thus misarticulating them. Articulations are at once answerable to and transformative of reality.

Acts of conceptualization are expressive in this sense when they simultaneously (i) strive to be faithful to an object that already exists prior to its conceptualization and (ii) help transform the object in new directions. If you and I sit together to articulate the meaning of our friendship, we might succeed not only in discerning genuine features of our friendship we previously missed but also in contributing to our friendship's maturation. Articulations aspire to objectivity while nevertheless bringing new degrees of reality to their objects.

What qualifies as a good articulation is, moreover, *open-ended*. While our articulations of our friendship are assessable on a range from discerning to deluded, this presupposes neither just one right articulation nor a single *telos* for our friendship's maturation. This is an innocuous feature of our everyday use of the concept of maturation: we speak of an artist's sensibilities as having 'matured' without supposing just one possible trajectory for their artistic career. The same goes for our articulations of phenomena like friendships and emotions. The criteria for criticizing articulations are thus indexed to the case at hand, requiring a form of *immanent criticism*. As Taylor puts it, 'it is not exactly that I have no yardstick, in the sense that anything goes, but rather that what takes the place of the yardstick is my deepest unstructured sense of what is important, which is as yet inchoate and which I am trying to bring to definition' (1985, pp. 41–2). Rahel Jaeggi similarly describes a sort of immanent criticism in which 'a given object is not measured against a rigid, unchanging yardstick; rather, the yardstick of criticism itself has a dynamic character in the sense that it transforms itself in the exercise of criticism' (2018, p. 193). When we articulate phenomena like friendships and emotions, it matters that we get them right, even as we reshape the phenomena we are trying to get right. In this way,

the expressive logic of articulation restricts, even as it enables, the open-endedness of our potential conceptualizations.

So, when human beings develop new ways of conceptualizing the conditions of human flourishing, are they *describing* or *articulating* them? We can pose this question in relation to Foot's idea that matters of moral importance are shaped by 'quite general facts' (2001, p. 45) that characterize a life-form. Do our efforts to find new conceptual means to express such facts follow the *straightforward logic of description*, such that they already exist, fully formed and intact, just waiting to be made explicit? Or does the self-interpretation of a species by its own members follow *the expressive logic of articulation*, such that these 'quite general facts' bear a more sensitive relation to the concepts that convey them?

In many cases, description seems more fitting. Consider the formulation of natural historical judgments concerning features of our life-form viewed from a strictly biological standpoint. Take the relatively recent scientific effort to understand the human microbiome, the genetic material of microbes living in our bodies in a mostly symbiotic relationship, helping us digest, regulate our immune systems, and produce vitamins. Though research into the human microbiome began in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the late 1980s that its existence was generally accepted and that a scientific terminology, including the term, 'microbiome', came into prominence. This is an example of a new conceptualization of biological processes that went on in humans for a very long time and which continue to go on indifferently to their conceptualization. Cases like this, which involve strictly biological claims about our life-form, seem more accurately characterized as *life-form descriptions* than *articulations*.

To be sure, the development of new conceptualizations of the microbiome has led to efforts to alter it in various ways. Our new conceptualizations put us in a position to, as scientists working on the Human Microbiome Project put it, 'define the parameters needed to design, implement and monitor strategies for intentionally manipulating the human microbiota, to optimize its performance in the context of an individual's physiology' (Turnbaugh *et al.*, 2007). This sort of transformative effect, however, is distinct from a *life-form articulation*. Articulations transforms their objects directly, through our conceptualizations themselves, not merely through additional, indirect effects. In this example, our microbiome is transformed not by our conceptualizations themselves, but what we do in light of our conceptualizations.

By contrast, there is a group of natural historical judgments aimed at what we could call, following Taylor, 'metabiological' features of

our life-form (2016, pp. 91–2, 184–90). These features are not susceptible to being understood in reductively biological terms because a grasp of their full significance requires a perspective shaped by evaluations and emotions. While one can formulate and understand objectively correct natural-historical judgments about oaks' root systems, owls' eyes, and the human microbiome from a relatively neutral and dispassionate perspective, certain features of our life-form are only appreciable from an ethically non-neutral and emotional perspective. What it means to enjoy a sense of communion with loved ones, strive to become virtuous, experience humiliation, or resent wrongdoing cannot be fully comprehended from a perspective wholly outside, or neutral with respect to, the engaged perspective of one who can feel their emotional weight and respond to their evaluative significance. Foot's example of 'the long dependency of the human young and what it means to parents to be able to rely on a promise securing the future of their children in case of their death' (2001, p. 45) is a life-form characterization of this sort. This does not mean that such characterizations can never be reflected upon dispassionately or repeated by rote. The point, rather, is that seeing our lives reflected in characterizations like this, or reaffirming them when they are under threat, presupposes our capacity to feel their emotional weight and evaluative place in our lives.

With this distinction in place, I can formulate my claim more precisely: while the development of new conceptualizations to express strictly biological features of our life-form may follow the straightforward logic of *description*, the development of new conceptualizations to express metabiological features of our life-form follows the expressive logic of *articulation*.

Why think this? It follows if we embrace the following two ideas. The first is that metabiological features of our life-form could not exist without certain evaluations and emotions involved in experiencing them. For example, certain vulnerabilities to wrongs endemic to our life-form, say, being humiliated by oppressive social relations, are what they are, in significant part, because we can experience certain socially nuanced forms of suffering. In Foot's phrase, it would be different if human beings were different, if our evaluative and emotional responses were structurally impervious to humiliation. This is not to deny that people can be wronged or suffer injustice without feeling anything. Rather, the point is that, if our life-form were so fundamentally different that experiences of humiliation had no place, or were experienced in a radically different way, then certain forms of wrongdoing would not exist, and others might come into being. The same goes for ethically enriching features of our life-form,

such as friendship, conversation, art, and communion with nature. Such goods presuppose capacities to feel certain emotions and evaluations, along with a broader repertoire of embodied, affective, and psychological modes of worldly engagement. Subtract the relevant emotions and evaluations, and such goods go with them. By the same token, if our emotional and evaluative capacities change in significant ways, such experience-dependent goods may themselves alter. In these ways, metabiological features of our life-form depend upon, and are alterable by changes in, our being creatures who experience a certain range of emotions and evaluations.

The second idea is that our capacities for the evaluative and emotional responses that actualize metabiological features of our life-form are deeply informed by the concepts and languages we use to articulate them. A new conceptualization in the domain of emotional responses to interpersonal behaviour is not like the invention of the concept of a ‘microbiome’, as the microbiome persists independently of our conceptualization. When it comes to evaluation and emotion we find a more sensitive relationship to our concepts and words. ‘The constitutive power of language operates here in a different way’, Taylor explains. ‘Here, in the realm of metabiological meanings, expression opens new and unsuspected realms. The new enacted and/or verbal expressions open up new ways of being in the world’ (2016, pp. 188–9). We may imagine a linguistic community that initially begins with an undifferentiated concept of ‘anger’, yet eventually develops a more fine-grained vocabulary capable of differentiating between a range of subtle responses – say, ‘resentment’, ‘indignation’, ‘fury’, ‘outrage’, and ‘annoyance’ – that had initially been swallowed up by the single concept. Prior to this articulation, this broader range of emotions may have been felt, albeit in an inchoate, unfocused, or confused way. After articulation, the feelings may be experienced differently: they might become sharper, because cognitively and emotionally more precise. They might become more powerful or, conversely, more easily subdued. Regardless of how they alter, evaluations and emotions are not indifferent to the ways they are thought and expressed.¹⁷

¹⁷ I develop this point further, with specific reference to emotional responses of anger, in Congdon (2018) and Congdon (forthcoming, chap. 3). The idea that emotional experience is shaped by concepts and words learned through culture and upbringing has recently gained increased acceptance in psychological and neuroscientific research on emotion (see, e.g., Barrett, 2017 and Siegel *et al.*, 2018) and sociological research on emotion (see, e.g., Barbalet, 1992 and 2001). For a philosophical defence of the idea that

Combining these two ideas – that metabiological features of our life-form depend for their existence upon, and change alongside, relevant forms of emotion and evaluation, and that the relevant forms of emotion and evaluation are shaped by the concepts and words used to express them – we arrive at the thesis stated earlier. Metabiological features of our life-form follow the expressive logic of articulation rather than straightforward description. This is not to say such features are created *ex nihilo*. Nor is it the claim, lapsing into an uncritical relativism, that metabiological features of our life-form may be articulated in any direction whatsoever. It is the more subtle claim that our conceptualizations and linguistic expressions co-constitute these features in concert with other forces and within the bounds of real constraints. So, when it comes to metabiological features of our life-form, the function of language cannot be merely that of labelling independently existing facts. Rather, as human beings collectively struggle to articulate the ways we are – returning to one of our earlier examples – morally vulnerable to humiliation, we may succeed not only in illuminating the contours of our vulnerabilities but in creating new ways of inhabiting our vulnerability and valorising the forms of care it calls for. The same goes for our efforts to articulate goods like friendship, art, conversation, and communion with nature. When our articulations go well, they might succeed, not only in shedding light on pre-existing yet overlooked possibilities for human flourishing, but in opening space for new such possibilities. If articulators join in mass movements that initiate large-scale changes in the ways we conceptualize such goods, this may rise to the level of *life-form articulation*.

Consider a concrete case. We are currently living through a multi-generational struggle to articulate the wrongs of gender-based oppression and the modes of flourishing it hinders. This struggle has involved the development of myriad new conceptualizations that express a wide range of experiences and values. A large part of this effort has consisted in expanding vocabularies for naming gender-based violence, for example, ‘marital rape’, ‘date rape’, ‘domestic abuse’, ‘sexual harassment’, and ‘sexual objectification’.¹⁸ Yet it also involves the expression of positive experiences, such as overlooked and newly developed forms of connection and happiness.

emotions are not static biological features of our nature, but historical and cultural results, see Rorty (1986).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Alcoff (2018), Anderson (2006), Brownmiller (1999), Crary (2007, chap. 5), and Freedman (2002).

Here we may think, for instance, of the evolution of consciousness raising, new elaborations of the value of care, new ways of celebrating the aesthetics of embodiment beyond the ‘male gaze’, and experiments in the pleasures of sex beyond heteronormative desire.¹⁹ My proposal is that we interpret the overlapping struggles to develop such new conceptualizations as contributing to a large-scale, multi-generational effort of life-form articulation, such that the new conceptualizations not only help illuminate existing features of our life-form, but help develop new forms of flourishing.

Notice how this contrasts with two alternatives, which stand at opposite extremes. One interpretation involves the idea that humanity is finally recognizing the ahistorical fact of the injustice of gender-based oppression. On this view, we might change, but morality does not. Michele Moody-Adams (2004, 2017, and 2022) argues that the fundamental moral concepts capable of condemning gender-based oppression have always in principle existed (concepts like *justice*, *equality*, and *dignity*), yet we as a species have, for most of human history, either misinterpreted these concepts or failed to put them into practice. Living through large-scale social revolutions, therefore, ‘does not (indeed cannot) teach anything fundamentally new about morality’ (2004, p. 268). Her conviction is a form of partial historicism: though our beliefs and practices may change, the underlying fundamental concepts of morality remain immutable.

Contrast Moody-Adams’ interpretation with Robert Pippin, who views the idea of immutable moral concepts with scepticism. From his perspective, it is naïve to look at large-scale moral revolutions and not think the underlying values have changed. Also discussing gender-based oppression, Pippin writes,

it is, at the very minimum, highly implausible that the right explanation for this change (and the right way to take account of it in a philosophical theory of normativity) is that someone or some group discovered a moral fact that had lain hidden for thousands of years, in principle accessible to human beings but unfortunately (for the thousands of generations involved) undiscovered. One could say the same thing about slavery, child labor, colonialism. (2008, p. 276)

Though the two views look diametrically opposed, they share a questionable supposition. Pippin’s rejection of ‘moral facts’ is

¹⁹ On consciousness raising groups, see Brownmiller (1999) and Freedman (2002). On the ethics of care, see Held (2006). On the male gaze, see Mulvey (1975). On sexual pleasure, see hooks (2001, chap. 10).

underwritten by the assumption that they must conform to the immutability thesis, such that they stand outside history, laying 'hidden for thousands of years'.²⁰ Moody-Adams' insistence upon the ahistoricity of fundamental moral concepts is similarly structured by the immutability thesis, for it betrays the worry that objective moral criticism will lose its footing if the ground itself can shift.

If historicized ethical naturalism is a genuine alternative, we can recover a notion of moral objectivity with all the moral-critical power Moody-Adams wants without embracing the historically insensitive Platonism Pippin views with scepticism. With respect to gender-based oppression, historicized ethical naturalism leaves room for the idea that morally salient facts pre-exist and justify moral criticism. Life-form articulations, if they are successful, express rational considerations that are already there prior to their conceptualization. On the Aristotelian view defended here, these 'rational considerations' are neither transcendent platonic entities of the sort Cudworth and Clarke defended nor formal features of pure practical reason, but naturalistic considerations about what we need to survive, flourish, and be actualized. This leaves room for us to say, with Moody-Adams, that rational considerations capable of condemning gender-based oppression are at least as old as gender-based oppression itself. At the same time, we may hold that the ensuing revolution involves a massive reshaping of basic human self-conceptions and experiences, including how humans understand kinship, social reproduction, childcare, sex, gender, marriage, love, law, waged work versus housework, the private/public distinction, notions of inequality, freedom, esteem, and respect. It holds that historical shifts as profound as this are not necessarily evaluable in relation to already existing forms of flourishing but may articulate new ones.

6. Conclusion

The immutability thesis imposes a dichotomy upon us: (a) posit at least some immutable moral grounds or (b) reject moral objectivity altogether in favour of thorough historicism. It can look, moreover, as though (a) is the only choice for ethical naturalists, who must defend an invariant core of our life-form. If (b) is an option at all

²⁰ Pippin's rhetoric also ignores the possibility that the relevant moral facts were not 'unfortunately missed' but actively suppressed by patriarchal ideology.

for an ethical naturalist, the resulting position would be heterodox, perhaps holding that a shared life-form is not a ground to be *discovered* but an aspirational condition we *invent*. Regardless, the dichotomy between (a) and (b) leaves no place for the position defended here, namely, an ethical naturalism that views our life-form as a simultaneously historical and objective ground. We can restate the aim of this paper, then, as attempting to outline an alternative that reveals this to be a false dichotomy.

Let us assemble the ideas defended above, concluding that together they outline a viable third option. I started by making explicit the immutability thesis, which holds that, if objective moral grounds exist, they must be immutable (Sections 1 and 2). If the immutability thesis is true, the dichotomy between (a) and (b) follows as a formal consequence. Yet we have reason to doubt the immutability thesis' status as a self-evident principle. When time is taken to defend it, the arguments in its favour rely upon additional commitments, such as the religious worldviews of Clarke and Cudworth or Kant's species-transcendent definition of moral objectivity. If such commitments are, at least, contentious, we are justified in exploring the conceptual space beyond (a) and (b).

I then argued (Sections 3 and 4) that the core commitment of ethical naturalism – the thesis of life-form dependence – can do without the immutability thesis. In holding that judgments about *x*'s flourishing are grounded in *x*'s life-form, we do not thereby commit ourselves to any conclusions about the inalterability of *x*'s life-form in part or whole. Since the thesis of life-form dependence allows us to draw a grammatical distinction between judgments of *natural* and *secondary goodness*, and since the former may be credited as objective insofar as they are grounded in, not the judge's merely subjective attitudes, but features immanent to the living phenomena they judge, we are provided with a model for a thoroughly historicized form of objective evaluative judgment. I urged, moreover, that to ground judgments of natural goodness in a historically evolved life-form is not to trade notions of moral *universality* and *necessity* for a view of moral requirements as merely parochial and contingent. We can even retain the notion that features of our life-form are available non-observationally. By retaining such notions in a historically sensitive guise – objectivity, universality, necessity, and non-observational knowledge – we can draw a clear distinction between a wholly relativistic view of morality as grounded in *sheer contingency* and a view of morality as grounded in *a life-form with a history*.

Finally, the notion of a *life-form articulation* (Section 5) expressed the idea that new conceptualizations of the conditions of human flourishing can have transformative effects on those conditions without sacrificing ethical objectivity. Life-form articulations simultaneously strive to be faithful to antecedent features of our life-form while potentially developing them in new directions. I provided an interpretation of the multigenerational struggle to articulate gender-based oppression along these lines. While such an interpretation surely requires further development, I hope to have shown, at least, that it both operates outside the extremes of (a) and (b) and merits our philosophical attention.

I have focused on historical changes to our life-form. Yet my argument implies that life-form articulations bring about transformations not only diachronically, across epochs of human existence, but synchronically, across cultures existing simultaneously. If synchronic cultural articulations are transformative of the life-form itself, to what extent are we justified in continuing to speak of '*the* human life-form'? Why not abandon talk of a unified life-form, opting instead for a view of overlapping yet mutually irreducible 'forms of life' or shapes of 'second nature'?

Echoing the two extremes considered above, we might think our only responses to the threat of the disunity of our life-form are either (a) to posit an invariant core that somehow metaphysically secures this unity or (b) view the unity of our life-form, not as a metaphysical fact, but as an ethical aspiration to be achieved. Yet if the immutability thesis is not an *a priori* constraint on our thinking, and if we equip ourselves with the expressive logic of articulation, we can see that what is true in each extreme can be combined into a third position that transcends both.

The truth in (a) is that our life-form articulations must strive faithfully to express objective considerations concerning what we need to survive, flourish, and be actualized. If ethical conversation between cultures is possible, it must involve articulations of the shared place such considerations occupy in a flourishing life. This does not mean such conversation will be easy. Yet nothing argued here poses any special threat to its possibility. In fact, our discussion above helps make perspicuous an oddity about efforts to bridge culturally distinct viewpoints by appealing to an 'invariant core' of our life-form. For if the conditions appealed to in such a conversation are not already objectively grounded in what we need to survive, flourish, and be actualized, then any further speculations about those conditions' immutability will be powerless to grant them the authority they do not already possess. By the same token, if certain conditions

of flourishing have been mutually and rightly recognized by culturally diverse conversation partners as shared features of a life-form, to add the further claim that those futures are immutable will be superfluous, for they already bear all the objectivity required. In short, when what is at stake is the purported objectivity of some condition of shared human flourishing, any further claim about its immutability is, strictly speaking, a *non sequitur*. Hence, thoroughly historicized ethical naturalism has no special problem holding that appeals to antecedently existing features of a shared life-form can serve as rational considerations in conversations across culturally distinct viewpoints.

The truth in (b) is that the unity of our life-form is something we not only rely upon as a ground but help shape through our articulations. The proposition that you and I are bearers of a common ethical form is itself an ethical commitment, and whatever truth this proposition expresses must be articulated. It is, to use our earlier terminology, not a merely biological claim about our being properly taxonomized as *Homo sapiens*, but the metabiological claim that we share an ethical horizon. If you express this to me, bidding me to recognize you as a fellow life-form bearer, your claim, along with any conversation that ensues, will follow the expressive logic of articulation. As we discuss the prospect of our shared humanity, we must strive to be faithful to objective constraints we can neither will into existence nor will away. Yet we must also struggle to conceptualize this prospect, which may usher in articulation's transformative dimensions. If our conversation goes well and we find common ground, we should not expect this to leave us unchanged. We neither discover nor invent our shared humanity. Being human is a condition we articulate.²¹

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